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SURGEON-GENERAL OF THE GERMAN ARMY, PROFESSOR OF
SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN.

BY WALTER B. PLATT, M. D.

[Read before the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club, April 9, 1894.]



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**BARON VON LANGENBECK,
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Among the surgeons of the present century who by noble thoughts and acts inspire their pupils with unbounded admiration, there is none who has received and deserved more than Bernhard von Langenbeck, both on account of his great professional achievements as well as by reason of the rare personal qualities, which were those of a leader of men. The one made him far and away the first surgeon of his day in Europe; the other, a man most beloved by his pupils, patients and colleagues.

To how few are these qualities granted! United with stability of purpose, they must produce a certain result. This is seen throughout his intensely active and useful life. It was my rare good fortune to know him, to see and hear him often, to meet him frequently at his own house.

The impress of his character will remain indelible. In looking over the enthusiastic and almost tearful notices written in different parts of Europe by his many pupils soon after his death, the same impression seemed to have been made upon all. There was the greatest admiration of the man as well as of the brilliant surgeon.

On the shores of the Weser just as it empties into the North Sea, Langenbeck was born November 8, 1810, in the small village of Padingbüttel. His father, George Langenbeck, was the local clergyman and chaplain. His mother's maiden name was Johanna Sussman. The father is said to have been a most excellent pastor, and teacher as well; among his pupils was Count Borries. His half-brother, that is to say the half-uncle of young Langenbeck, was the well known Professor of



Surgery at Göttingen, who was among the last of those who united the branches of ophthalmology and surgery.

Young Langenbeck early showed a great fondness for knowing how various animals "looked inside," and dissected these upon all occasions. He studied under the direction of his father, who designed him for the ministry, his studies being in part such as would prepare him for theology. What passed between father and son when the latter decided upon a different course is unknown. The fact in evidence remains that he entered the University of Göttingen, October 25, 1830, taking the medical course and remaining until 1834, when he took for his graduating thesis a dissertation upon "The Structure of the Retina." In this we may see the guiding hand of the uncle. That it was not due to this alone is probable, in view of the fact that a later addition was made to the thesis, concerning "Path. Anat. Alterations of the Retina." Microscopical work thus early claimed his interest, and he was speedily made a Docent in physiology and microscopy. While continuing in this branch, he soon began teaching operative surgery on the cadaver, giving private instruction with great success.

Soon after taking his degree, it is related that on returning for a visit to his father's house he was so besieged by the patients who came to seek his skill that he had to get out of a window by means of a ladder in order to make his escape. At Göttingen his courses in operative surgery attracted so much attention that he thought it best to go away, out of consideration to the feelings of his uncle, the regular Professor of Surgery. He was speedily called to the chair of surgery at the University at Kiel. Not long after, one of the Holstein wars broke out and he entered eagerly upon the career of army surgeon.

His success upon the field was so brilliant that before the war was fairly over he was called to Berlin to fill the chair of surgery, left vacant by Dieffenbach, who fell dead in his clinic when about to operate. "Youth" and "book learning" were urged against his appointment, which was delayed for a time. When he finally came in 1848 he found a crowded auditorium and enthusiastic applause awaiting him on his first appearance.

Then came other Holstein wars, in all of which Langenbeck took part, teaching as well as operating throughout his service, resembling in this respect Larrey, for whom he had great admiration. Before coming to Berlin Langenbeck had every advantage of foreign study, visiting Paris and London. In the latter city he knew Sir Benjamin Brodie, Lawrence, and Henry Green. He was especially attracted to Sir Astley Cooper, who, retired from active work, was then living at his country seat. Having no children, he made sons of his three nephews, the well-known surgeons Bransby Cooper, Aston Key, and John Tyrrel. Langenbeck was accustomed to meet them at their uncle's every Sunday, and passed delightful hours in their society. The pleasures and mutual advantage of social intercourse among professional men as shown at the meetings of the London Medico-Chirurgical Society impressed him strongly, and during his entire after-life he was fond of gathering his pupils about him. London was not revisited for forty-four years. During his thirty-four years in Berlin he founded the German Surgical Society, and for the last twelve years of his residence in that city was president of the Berlin Medical Society. When president of the German Surgical Congress he paid constant attention to every word of each speaker, although the long sittings must have been wearisome to him in his old age.

If Dieffenbach was the first great German surgeon, Langenbeck was the founder of German surgery as we know it to-day, where the constant striving is to build upon a foundation of biology and experimental pathology, where each result is subjected to the closest scientific scrutiny and criticism. He was a firm believer in carefully conducted experiments upon animals to verify or disprove the value of new surgical procedures.

He was an enthusiastic army surgeon, participating in all the Holstein wars, in the war with Austria in '66, and in the Franco-Prussian war of '70. He took the most advanced ground in military surgery regarding the ambulance system, work on the field, and the absolute neutrality of hospitals. The Red Cross movement excited his keen interest, and he attended the Geneva Conference, where decided advances were made. Any violation of the Red Cross symbol to avoid capture

excited his utmost indignation. He heartily endorsed the words of the German Emperor, who nobly said, "A wounded enemy is no more an enemy, but a comrade needing our help."

He endeavored to inspire his young army surgeons with the highest ideas of duty, saying, "While we may not expect a military surgeon to know everything, yet there are things he must know to a degree approaching perfection."

Nor did he fail to illustrate his stern ideas of duty, on the bloody field of Gravelotte, when, being told that his best beloved son had been fatally wounded, replied, "I cannot leave, my duty keeps me here." He did not see him until the day following. An English surgeon who accompanied the German army during the campaign of '70 was strongly impressed with the affection and reverence the young surgeons showed for Langenbeck. In this campaign he performed a large number of those subperiosteal resections with which his name will always be associated. He notes the greatly decreased mortality where a resection can be substituted for an amputation. Wherever there was much to be done he was to be found, although he never interfered with his subordinates nor deprived them of operations which were his for the taking.

Langenbeck was a man who wrote but little when we consider the number of years he was at work. Thought and a conservative originality are on every page that came from his pen. His articles and pamphlets number but 47; his operations must reach into many thousands. He founded the *Archiv für Chirurgie*, and devised new methods of operating on hare-lip. His *uranoplastik*, an operation for the closure of cleft palate in which the mucous membrane with the periosteum is loosened from the bone, is well known. His joint resections are the best we have to-day. He was one of the earliest to advocate the immediate fixation of fractures by means of immovable dressings. Langenbeck reminds us that it was Heine who in 1830-40 did the first subperiosteal resections, upon dogs. The results of his experiments are still to be seen in the Museum of the University of Würzburg.

We must not forget to mention that while at Kiel Langenbeck was called to the chair of surgery at Munich. The appointment failed of royal confirmation, and a favorite was installed in the place.

In his early days he was one of the first to assert that glanders was caused by a micro-organism. The real organism he mistook. The microscopes and the technique of that day did not admit of following up the ultimate cause.

Langenbeck was the great teacher of surgery on the Continent. Pupils from distant parts of Europe and America flocked to see and hear him. He was especially devoted to helping young men by every means in his power to acquire what they came for. Many of his pupils are now the most eminent surgeons of Germany; among these may be mentioned Billroth, Trendelenburg, Hüter, Krönlein and Bose. Billroth, Langenbeck's assistant for seven years, loved him as a father. He says, "His name is written in golden letters not only in the Book of History but in the Book of Love of all his pupils and friends," and in speaking of his immediate popularity on assuming the chair of Surgery at Berlin, said, "In a short time he had conquered the hearts of pupils, colleagues and patients." "His charm of personality captivated all. He was the inspired leader of youth, their incarnate ideal of a clinical teacher." "His place among us, or rather over us German surgeons, was at the same time by the grace of God and by our choice."

The occasion of his 70th birthday in November, 1880, might be called a love-feast. Sixteen full professors of surgery who had been either his own assistants or those of his devoted followers, gathered about him, the students of the University gave him a torch-light procession, and the citizens in general caught the enthusiasm. His was the wonderful gift of mingling freely with his subordinates without the slightest loss of their respect or admiration. Absolutely cold-blooded in operating, he was the kindest and most warm-hearted of men. To quote the words of another, "Endued with a sympathetic voice, he was at the same time fluent of speech and modest of demeanor, while he combined a charm and impressiveness of manner with an intimate knowledge of detail."

Small in stature and slight in figure, with an exquisitely refined face and a noble look in his eye, he was an aristocrat by nature and in feeling.

His life was an active one. He rose at five in the morning and took a horseback ride when the weather permitted imme-

ately after coffee. At six he gave a course in operative surgery on the cadaver to graduates in medicine or last-year students. At eight he saw his office patients. From ten to two he attended to his private practice and made his hospital visit. At two or soon after he operated daily in his clinic upon the most difficult cases. Finishing at 4.30 p. m., he spent the remainder of the day with his friends, his family, or in writing.

He was an excellent teacher, clear in thought and expression, and careful in arrangement of his subject-matter. Langenbeck was a rapid and bold operator. He never failed to neatly cover in the large defects left after removing extensive malignant growths from the face, bringing up and turning in flaps of skin from apparently impossible places, and sending out the patient entirely presentable.

In operating he was fond of using small knives, which were sharpened in the operating room by the assistants immediately before an operation. When a knife had served him well in some important operation he was accustomed to have a small notch cut in the handle for future reference.

After an operation he invariably applied the dressing with his own hands. It was impossible not to give him your whole attention during a clinic or lecture. His earnest voice and fiery manner fascinated the beholder as if under the spell of a magician.

At the close of the Franco-Prussian war he was the recipient of honors and decorations from nearly every court of Europe, and the thanks of the Emperor, with whom he stood on the double footing of friend and physician.

Soon after his 70th birthday, with fame in no way diminished, he resigned his chair in the University on account of a cataract which interfered with his work. Retiring to his beautiful villa situated on the hills overlooking the city of Wiesbaden, he passed the remainder of his days, dying September 29, 1887, of apoplexy, at the age of 77, leaving behind him a name which men delight to honor.

[I am under obligations to addresses by Billroth and Von Bergmann, as well as to an article in the London Lancet, for such facts as were not derived from my own knowledge of Von Langenbeck and his environment.—W. B. P.]

